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ABSTRACT

In examining the field of speech communication and its research, it is clear that most research has focused on linking (linking the individual with the human environment) and regulatory (the regulation of human behavior) behavior. However, the primary goal of human communication is mentation (the development of higher mental processes), and this has been mostly ignored by researchers. Research has been characterized by commitment not to particular substantive ideas but to a particular style. Research to show how the parts of communicational processes fit together would raise the power of speech communication's research questions and put it on the road toward gaining academic distinctiveness. Research directed to the nature of human symbolic behavior (how information is processed) would contribute to distinctiveness and viability. (TJ)

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THE STATUS OF RESEARCH IN COMMUNICATION JOURNALS

by

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THE STATUS OF RESEARCH IN COMMUNICATION JOURNALS

Ask individuals within and outside our discipline who we are and what we are and the response will be varying. From within you will hear such answers as: "Well, actually I really am a social psychologist," or "I really look at human behavior from a sociological perspective," or "Most of my teaching and research focuses on management-labor relations." From outside the field you are likely to hear: "They are teachers of talk," "Practitioners of persuasion," "Debators and directors of drama." In other words, we frequently identify and are identified as being "something else." To some extent, this paper is also "something else." My title (which I might thank Professor Meyer for inventing for me) is "The Status of Research in Communication Journals." Please note, Professor Meyer has not even confined me to the discipline of Speech Communication--I will!!! Perhaps I should thank Dr. Meyer for permitting me such potential scope in my presentation. My first thought was to review the publications of the last year produced by the Bell Telephone Company. My next thought was to engage in a rhetorical criticism of soybean reports issued by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. But then, if I were to have taken such an approach, someone would accuse me of doing that "something else." So, I decided I should take my title, define it, and get to the matter at hand. A quick look at some Webster's and Roget's provided me with this information. "Status" may be defined as the condition of a person or thing; a condition may be defined as that which exists as an occasion of something else; "Research" may be defined as a studious inquiry. Inasmuch as I chose to confine myself to Speech Communication research rather than grain reports or switching systems, I will define

this portion of my title as the study of the nature, process, and effects of human symbolic interaction. This paper, therefore, may be defined as "A Studious Inquiry Into the Nature, Process, and Effects of Human Symbolic Interaction Research With Respect to Its Condition as It Currently Exists as an Occasion of Something Else."

Perhaps one of the reasons why some have such a difficult time acquiring a handle on this phenomena called speech communication is because we do have the potential for such semantic acrobats. If, as Berlo (Berlo, 1960, p. 25) has noted, humans do not discover reality, we create it, then why, as a discipline, are we continually trying to "discover" who we are? Fisher (Fisher, 1978, p. 9) has pointed out that "The phenomena of communication is a constant. It does not change. Only our understanding of it changes." To this end is where I believe more of our research efforts should be directly focused. Not preoccupied with the semantics of defining and re-defining communication (i.e. does it really matter if it is called attraction or homophily, communication apprehension or speech anxiety, source credibility or image?) but rather with the pragmatics of understanding it and the utility of what that understanding is. Our end purpose to such research should not be just to see our name and title in print in QJS, Communication Education, HCR, Communication Monographs, etc., but also to see of what value these research findings might be to the fellow inhabitants of our environment.

Do not misunderstand me. Identification, definition, and classification are important contributions to theory construction. Most certainly, the results of the New Orleans Conference and Pheasant Run (incidentally,

I do believe the scholars at the Pheasant Run Conference had a certain flair for labeling their meeting that was not evidenced by their colleagues in New Orleans) have given us certain direction and guidelines. Possession of taxonomies and accumulation of information, however, do not preclude our understanding of it.

Let us get to some basics. The fact that humans do indeed communicate is not our unique distinction from other life forms. The fact that this communication is based upon a highly sophisticated and complex symbolic system, is. In my opinion, there is a need in our field to be more discrete with respect to what we study about this symbolic system. Frank Dance (Dance, 1978, p. 20) has put it well: "Humans articulate symbols that have certain functional outcomes. These outcomes are: (1) linking (linking the individual with the human environment), (2) mentation (the development of higher mental processes), (3) regulation (the regulation of human behavior)."

If we accept (and I can) these three outcomes as constituting the warp and woof of human communication research, where have our efforts as scholars of human communication theory been directed? Even a cursory perusal of our journals will quickly reveal the answer. These endeavors have focused primarily on the study of "linking" and "regulatory" behavior. The New Orleans Conference, for example, stated that research in speech communication focuses on the ways in which messages link participants during interaction. From the National Developmental Project on Rhetoric came the notion that rhetorical studies are considered to include transactions in which symbols or systems of symbols influence values, attitudes, beliefs, and actions--in other words, regulatory behaviors.

I suggest that much of what influences our research direction may be attributed to the models we follow. Delia (Delia, 1977, p. 72) has pointed out that the primary focus of communication research has been with respect to what might be called "variable analysis." That is, ". . . the examination of discrete factors (variables) upon communication outcomes (effects). Most frequently, of course, research in this tradition has focused upon the influence of some source, channel, message, or receiver characteristic upon attitude change in the recipients of communication." In other words, once again, "linking" and "regulatory" behaviors. Dennis Gouran (Gouran, 1979 in press) has recently suggested that there are four or at least four, basic concepts to the field of speech communication. "A message producer, a message, a target or receiver capable of responding, and a means of linking the agents involved." I do not disagree with such models nor do I disagree with the research that explores such interactions and their influence upon certain outcomes. Rather, I agree with Dance (Dance, 1978, p. 18) when he states: "I am not suggesting the abandonment of the study of communication interaction, or the study of the role of human communication in interaction, I am instead stating that interaction is a secondary goal of what constitutes uniquely <u>human</u> communication, the primary goal of which was, is, and shall remain, mentation."

I share Frank Dance's concern. It seems to me, that two factors are critical for scholarly research. The significance of the question and the "goodness of fit" if you will, of the research methodology. On both counts, I question some of our research. This concern is apparently shared by others. Delia (Delia, 1977, pp. 72-73) has remarked that ". . . the variable

analytic tradition has been characterized by commitment not to particular substantive views, but to a particular style or mode of research. . . To the extent that those studying communication have shared values, those values have largely concerned how research ought to be conducted and not what are preferable theories or research questions." Richard Budd (Budd, 1977, p. 33) has pointed out that there is much evidence in our field ". . . that we are more and more tending in the direction of placing matters of research protocol above the significance of the problem under study." In other words, as I like to put it in my own inimical style, we are fashioning some very large and elegant porches on some very small and sparsely furnished outhouses.

To some extent, I believe we have become victims of what Kurt Lewin referred to as the "law of the hammer," the tendency to utilize a particular (and perhaps convenient) methodology to study a given phenomena regardless of the viability of that methodology. I, too, believe in the religion of "power" in statistical analysis, and the need for rigidity in research design is irrefutable. But a higher calling tells me that first we need additional rigidity and power in our research questions.

A wise and future thinking father once consulted his four sons with respect to what each wanted to become when he grew up. "Number one son," asked the father, "What do you wish to be when you grow up?" "I want to be an architect," replied number one son. "Very good, my son," replied the father. "You will be responsible for helping to design and create a new and better society." "And you, number two son, what do you want to be when you grow up?" "I want to be a lawyer," said number two son. "Very

good, my son. You shall be responsible for helping to create order and structure in the society your brother designs." "And you, number three son, what do you want to be when you grow up?" "I want to be a policeman," said number three son. "Very good, my son. You shall be responsible for maintaining law and order in the society designed and structured by your two older brothers." "And you, number four son, what do you want to be when you grow up?" "I want to be a speech communication scholar," said number four son. "NANO, NANO, NANO!!!" cried the father, and off he ran.

As a discipline, it seems to me as if we are viewed a little like Orkans. We look human, talk human, dress human, but few know what we really are. Perhaps if we become less concerned with discovering ourselves and more concerned with a research and teaching approach directly focusing upon the understanding of human symbolic behavior we would become less the Mork of the academic world. Gouran (Gouran, 1979 in press) has put it well: "The problem of distinctiveness is not the result of our interests but of the questions we ask. If anything needs to be excluded, it is the type of questions the answers to which have no implication for the generation, confirmation, or refinement of propositions concerning the functional relationships among communication concepts."

Whether you agree or disagree with our most recent taxonomy of speech communication (see Communication Education, Vol. 27, #3, September, 1978, p. 187), it is useful to have a taxonomy of one's discipline. But as Alfred Smith (Smith, 1977, p. 82) has remarked, a taxonomy of communication "should show how the parts of communicational processes fit together." Research designed to accomplish this end will not only raise the power of

our research questions but will also put us on the road toward gaining academic distinctiveness. Once again, Gouran (Gouran, 1979 in press) has called the shot. The distinctiveness of a discipline is based upon three indicies: First, ". . . it reflects some measurable degree of consensus or unity concerning its basic concepts. Second, it advances knowledge about relationships among those concepts. Finally, the knowledge the discipline develops has utility." We need to improve as well as continue research efforts from all methodological perspectives that are designed to contribute to the building of a theory of human behavior. But there is not, has not, nor probably ever will be a single, grand, global, all pervasive theory of human communicative behavior. While we need to focus on research questions that will tie what concepts together that can be tied, we need at the same time, as Richard Budd has put it (Budd, 1977, p. 35) ". . . to review and revise our criteria for what constitutes research and scholarship and leave behind our frequent and fruitless argument that 'pure' science needs no mission or pragmatic referent."

Research that addresses itself more specifically to the nature of human symbolic behavior (how information is processed), research in such areas dealing with problems of information dissemination and acquisition between public and private organizations and the general public, research dealing with problems in mental and physical health communication, and research into family relationships, to mention but a few, will not only contribute to the significance of our research but will also contribute to our need for distinctiveness and visability. Proposition 13 is and will continue to have its impact upon society; and the stockholders of academic

institutions, including our colleagues in other disciplines, have and probably will more vigorously exercise their right for some return on their investment. We need not only clean up our own internal act of research but at the same time recognize that we do not have the corner on the study of human communicative behavior anymore than does psychology, sociology, or any other discipline concerned with such issues. Distinctiveness can occur not only from significant, relevant research but also from an integration of our efforts with those disciplines of a similar bent. Frank Dance (Dance, 1978, p. 16) has stated this position with force: "The artificial compartmentalization of the academic superstructure results in a competitiveness and disciplinary isolationism culminating in jealousy and waste. Academic snobbery and one-upmanship inhibits rather than facilitates the common sharing and searching which should be the hallmarks of the academy."

When our research begins to focus more upon that which is unique to the process of human communication, and when the results of such research are applied and can be seen to apply to the population of humans for which it is intended, and when such efforts are integrated and can be seen to be integrated (with disciplines studying communication phenomena from their perspective)--then perhaps the Orkan of academia--Speech Communication will no longer have to struggle with the establishing of our identity.

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